

Sketch

Volume 77, Number 2

2013

Article 13

Smart

Molly Carpenter*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©2013 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

Smart

by MOLLY CARPENTER

“A-R-C-H-A-E-O-L-O-G-Y,” I recited the letters at a lightning pace, my voice rising high with the exhilaration. I openly smirked, waiting for the praise to wash over me.

“Wow, I never knew a third grader that could spell archaeology!” Mrs. Pundt was genuinely impressed, and I beamed with pride.

“Geez Molly, you’re like the smartest person ever. You should be president!” Dane Larson, Troublemaker, stirred the room with chuckles and murmurs of agreement.

“Pshh, no, I couldn’t be president!” I later said with masterful fake modesty as we walked in a meandering line down the hallway to art class. I of course knew that saying this would only strengthen the conviction of their campaign for my future presidency. “Wow, she’s smart and modest! Now that’s a winner!” they’d think. Sure enough more people joined in, shouting, “President Carpenter!” until they were shushed by a passing teacher.

This was my role, which I had started cultivating in the first grade after writing an original poem that rhymed. My teacher, in a fit of pride, printed the poem on a very large piece of poster board, laminated it, and hung it up on the classroom wall for the rest of the year. And thus I was marked forever, to live my life in the throes of expectation. “What feat will she perform next?” the people must have constantly wondered. They then watched in amazement as I breezed through all my spelling tests, excelled in math among students a year older than me, and progressed through the spelling bee, all gasping in horror as I was deceived by my tongue and fumbled the letters in “B-O-O-K-W-O-R-M.” But really, is that even a real word?

Learning alongside commoners was sometimes a challenge. My 5th grade teacher didn’t know what to do with me for math, seeing as I had already learned it all in the 4th grade. Often she would send three or four of us into the little conference room across the hall to work on advanced problems, so we would not be disrupted by those lagging behind us. Besides me there was always Eric and Collin, and sometimes Pam, who we sometimes did not like. During spelling bee season we special few were sent to the room every day during Spelling, in order to study from our specialized practice booklets. We would stride out of the classroom, mighty champions, clasping our booklets like they were Olympic medals. The other kids in our class must have wondered what went on in that little room. Were we studying responsibly, or gossiping about them, perhaps making

fun? Maybe we said things like, “I can’t believe Becca thought she might qualify for the spelling bee this year. She can barely even read!”, or, “I heard Pam’s dad makes her do extra homework. That is so scary.”

I could not spend all my time separated from the rest of the class, though. One activity that required participation from everybody was “Popcorn” reading. We went around, each reading a paragraph from a children’s magazine article, always about a random environmental topic, such as recycling, or otters. Some students found this to be more of a challenge than others. It was Becca’s turn. Becca, with her uncontrollable wiry hair and frighteningly loud sneezes. “Rivvvvver... otters....are....ac...ac...aquat...ic.....m-m-mamm...als.”

I could not help mouthing silently, “Aquatic, aquatic, aquatic, mammals, mammals, mammals.” I tapped my foot and drummed my fingers on the desk. My head twitched every time she got stuck. This was killing me. Why couldn’t she just say the words?! She was taking too long, there wouldn’t be enough time left for my turn to read. Becca was evil; she should be taken away.

Our teacher eventually had to stop her and my torture was ended. Now it was my turn. My heart beat crazily in anticipation. I was going to show her, show them all how it’s done. With adrenaline pumping, I sped through my paragraph, not stopping for breath until I was finished. What a breath of fresh air that must have been for everybody, to hear such flawless, unimpeded rhetoric. And I had made up for lost time. You’re welcome, class. They thanked me with their eyes.

My celebrity peaked right before the sixth grade arrived. The sixth grade B-track teacher was notoriously mean, according to gossip. Her name was German-sounding and harsh: Eisenberg (E.g. Heil Eisenberg!). When my class first met her, all of us sitting cross legged on the floor in front of her like little caricatured Indians, she stated that she does not, under any circumstances, play favorites. She lied.

The class had just adjourned from another cross-legged session in which we’d clasp our knees and stare at Mrs. Eisenberg’s old painted toes at eye level as she read aloud Stephen King, or C.S. Lewis. She was maybe trying to “stick it to the man,” except there was nobody protesting her reading choices. We all returned to our desks, rubbing our knees that were quickly outgrowing story time, to restore circulation. While transitioning to our next activity, Mrs. Eisenberg started talking about some assignment of ours she had just graded, and stated that Janelle Becky had done a particularly good job. Everybody loved Janelle Becky, because of her perky demeanor and fun name. Her father had died from cancer in the third grade, so it was only partially out of sympathy. While she was not a member of my ‘elite’ group, I still yearned to be her friend, as did we all.

“Janelle’s work has consistently been outstanding. It’s because she always gives it her best effort, no matter what.” At this point she started to get carried

away. “Janelle sets an example for all of you, because even though she might not be the smartest person in the room,” she shot me a quick glare, “she always tries harder than anyone else, and that’s truly deserving of an ‘A.’” Mrs. Eisenberg was not subtle.

I seethed. Why does Janelle get to be singled out, I thought to myself. Just because I’m smart doesn’t mean I don’t work hard. Scratch that, it’s not my fault if I don’t have to work as hard as everyone else. Gosh. This was prejudice.

Another day she read aloud to us during snack time, mercifully allowing us to remain at our marginally more comfortable desks. The book we were reading at the time was about a young boy who runs away to live in a hotel, and ends up getting kidnapped for ransom in the last chapter of the book by Home Alone-style thugs, a result of when two guys happen to own a creepy van with plenty of room for children and are strapped for cash. It was a dull little volume that taught us the value of family, and that if you’re gagged with a sock shoved in your mouth, you can spit it out if your saliva soaks through the fabric enough. She was reading a chapter near the beginning, in which the boy steps out of a taxi in front of the hotel and is received by a bellboy. All of us wondered what the guy was doing helping children when he should be off ringing bells. I stared down at my bag of Goldfish crackers on my desk, fingering through the bag and trying to pick out the saltiest ones. The reading stopped abruptly.

“Molly, what just happened?” Mrs. Eisenberg asked with a sarcastic tinge, placing the emphasis on the word “what” so as to sound accusatory. My heart stopped, or maybe started beating so fast that I couldn’t feel each individual beat. She had thought I wasn’t paying attention. Me.

My mind raced, trying to locate the correct answer to her question. Did she mean metaphorically? Was there some subtext I hadn’t picked up on? I obviously knew what had literally just happened in the book- she just said it. Why would she ask such a pointless question?

“Uhh...he just...stole something?” I said randomly.

Mrs. Eisenberg tried to restrain herself from smirking, poisoning herself to finally deliver the reprimand I so deserved in her mind, like a cat about to pounce on its prey.

“No, you-”

“Oh, the bellman just took his bag for him!” I corrected, switching back from my abstract approach to the logical one.

Her face fell. Her plans had been foiled. I was filled with a mixture of embarrassment for fumbling the question and a smart-alecky sense of triumph. It was a confusing moment, but in the end I came out on top. She tried to “catch” me multiple times after that, determined to prove that I am not perfect at everything, but never succeeded. I was too good.

My classmates eventually picked up on Mrs. Eisenberg's overzealous attitude toward me. One Saturday as I sat in my room, staring into space and playing tricks with my eyes to make the flowers on my walls swim around in loopy patterns, my Mom came in with a phone and told me I had a call. This was confusing. It wasn't that I never expected calls because I didn't have any friends, but rather that my friends and I hadn't yet learned to use other methods of communication besides talking to each other at recess. Apparently they had just discovered the wonders of three-way calling, however, without me. I picked up the phone.

"Hi, Molly. So, like, we were all talking and we decided that Mrs. Eisenberg has it out for you."

"Oh. Okay."

We said goodbye and I hung up, while the rest of them presumably kept talking, leaving me behind on their journey to becoming Teenage Girls.

After the call I felt relieved that at least the other girls sympathized with me. It didn't occur to me until later, however, that they had just called me for the sake of gossip. I was only the fuel for their fire; they had lost any real interest in me. They would eventually grow and change in stages, first to cruel little middle school girls with their clumsy, glittery makeup, then to bitchy high school girls with better makeup and heat-damaged hair. I changed in an entirely different way, though.

The sixth grade ended and I shed all my friends but one. For seventh grade I was to be on the "Discovery Team," a subset of the middle school that all the smart kids were funneled into. I was the only one from my class placed on that team, so I would never see any of them again anyway. I would just make new, smart friends, I told myself.

I sat in pre-algebra the first day of seventh grade, excited to be in a math class with an actual name, as opposed to the lamely titled 'seventh grade math' the rest of the school took instead. Mrs. Lornell, a kind-faced old woman who somehow managed to never raise her voice in a room filled with wild, Lion King-style hyena children, wrote a math problem on the chalk board. "How many of you have seen this type of problem before?" I raised my hand and grinned proudly, taking note of how many didn't raise their hands. Mrs. Lornell grinned back, humoring me in my complete lack of self-awareness.

"Does anyone know how to solve it?"

I felt the familiar tingling of exhilaration rising up in my chest. My forehead felt hot and my hands trembled as I shot the left one up into the air once more. Here was the moment to prove myself to an entirely new group of people. Prepare to be amazed, Seventh Grade! "You subtract X from both sides and then, like, put them together!" Silence. No words of praise, no outburst of applause.

My heart rate accelerated again, but in the bad way that you feel resonating in your stomach. My throat tightened as a realized, in horror, what I had done.

“...Uhh, no.” Mrs. Lornell didn’t even understand what I was trying to explain. It was that wrong. She tried to save me by offering redemption. “Did you mean that you should add the two sides?”

Now I realized I really had no idea how to do this problem, but was trapped until it was solved.

“...No, I think I was just thinking of something else.” I said meekly, retreating within myself. Later, when I was thinking straight again, I prayed God would give me a time machine so I could go back and change my response to “Yes, that is what I meant. Ahaha, what a silly misunderstanding!” Instead, the moment remains in my mind as the first of many embarrassing moments that, when I think of, cause me to groan and bury my head in my arms.

I decided that the best way to avoid such occurrences from ever happening again was to remain silent at all times. It was better to not say anything than to be wrong. If I was wrong, people would think I wasn’t smart. If I wasn’t smart, then I was nothing. Even if I knew the answer when nobody else did, I’d squirm in my seat but not dare open my mouth, lest the wrong words came out. My physical presence was the only sign of life.

The class that challenged this behavior the most was Language Arts. If there was any subject I had a natural ability for, it was English, and repressing it was painful. The teacher, Mr. Wilkoff, was uncomfortably attractive. When sitting at my desk in his class, I’d stare straight down, afraid of what I might accidentally look at with my eye level at three feet above the ground, as he walked in between our desks. He was the kind of teacher that would make us say the swear words when we read out loud from books. The boys would hang out in his room during lunch, because he played Panic! At the Disco on the speaker system, just daring an administrator to come in and stop him. He had buttons pinned to his messenger bag promoting bands his friends were in. He singled me out.

One day, upon noticing that I had just finished reading a book, he led me over to the shelf that held his personal collection of books, the kinds that one would never find in a middle school library, and that may have contributed to his firing years later when I was in high school. He picked out four or five of his favorites and laid them on my desk. One of them had a swear word in the title. I’d never even said a swear word before. What kind of person did he think I was?

“Which one looks the best to you?”

“Uh...I’m, I’m not sure.”

He chuckled at my awkwardness, flashing an adorable grin.

“That’s okay, I’ll let you look them over and decide.”

I was petrified, unsure whether I was supposed to take one with me when

I left. These were his own books; surely he wasn't just going to let some random student take one. What if someone saw me carrying around the swear word book? Would I get in trouble? And what if there was...sex in it? As class was letting out I panicked and left them all sitting on the desk in my rush to escape, accidentally rebuffing Mr. Wilkoff's attempt to reach out to me.

It was hopeless. It seemed I was lost forever inside my head, serving a sentence for my childhood behavior. My obsessive need to be the smartest had turned against me, forcing me deeper and deeper within myself, never to see the light of day again. When asked, I would tell people that I am just extremely shy, because it was too much trouble to explain. They would be better off letting me stew in my shame, alone.

As I sat stewing in homeroom, my name was called over the loudspeaker during the morning announcements. This was confusing. Somebody had nominated me for a "Cougar Award" (named after our mascot, not because cougars are thought to be a good representation of success). The criteria for the award were very ambiguous, but still it meant that someone had actually noticed me do something. I went upstairs to a part of the school I had never been in before to retrieve my Cougar Award, wondering what I possibly could have done that someone had found worthy of recognition. All I ever did these days was sit and stare. I walked in to the unfamiliar classroom and an adult figure handed me a piece of printer paper with a Dum-Dum stapled to it. The paper read "Cougar Award. To- Molly Carpenter." Underneath that in the white space there was a handwritten note- "For surprising me every time she writes or says something. Benjamin Wilkoff."

Maybe I am still in there, somewhere.

Molly Carpenter is a junior in Community and Regional Planning, with a minor in English. She is originally from Colorado.